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ABSTRACT

Composition classes at East Georgia College, a two-year college in the University System of Georgia, use some literature and literary discussions without compromising the "integrity" of the composition course. Cultural backgrounds of students are similar--most come from non-reading homes, and some say they have never read a whole book. Additionally, the economic situation in the rural area is grim. East Georgia College has moved away from canonical works and toward selection of contemporary novels, even best sellers, biographies, and autobiographies. When possible, the authors visit the campus and speak to the students. Considerations for selection include moderate length of the novel, low cost, no "Cliff Notes" available, and difficulty of the text. The selection process ends only when students respond to the books in writing. Students are quizzed on the book before discussion begins, discuss the book, and then receive writing assignments with at least four choices. Reading novels, biographies, and autobiographies stimulates students' thinking and their expression of those thoughts in both oral and written form. Composition instructors know that students continue to read after they leave the classroom and the college because former students write and tell them so. (RS)

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Novels in the Composition Class:
An Enigma or Stimulating Strategy?

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"Dr. Bridges, I bought Cold Sassy Tree today. I can't wait to read it."

Now, that student may sound as if he or she is trying to garnish a few points, but the truth is that Bonnie was not enrolled in any English class that quarter. She purchased the book from the college bookstore not because it was a requirement but because she wanted to. Of course, not all students enjoy the books we teachers select to this extent, but some do. Promoting lifelong reading is one objective of East Georgia College's English courses--all of them, even composition--because we believe that learning is a lifelong pursuit and to read is to continue to learn.

I don't believe any English instructor would disagree with this premise, but there are those who don't believe that composition classes should engage in literary discussion. However, I believe that it is possible to use some literature, without compromising our integrity as composition teachers. Since both reading and writing take practice, we must provide opportunities for both (Holladay 187).

At East Georgia College, a two-year college in the University System of Georgia, the students range in age from 16 to 66, the usual spread for a two-year college. Interests and ages vary, but the cultural background of most is similar. Most come from non-reading homes, some say they have never read a whole book, and the economic situation in this geographic area is grim. The beautiful college campus of 207 acres is located in a rural setting, and the commuting students drive in from small towns from a fifty-mile radius. Experiences beyond small town life are few. As a rule these students are polite, serious, and open to suggestion. Otherwise, the procedures we use and the books we read in composition classes might not work.

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When I began teaching in 1961 in a two-year college, five classic novels were required in English 101, a procedure I inherited. This amount of reading did wreck havoc with the writing instruction. But did I teach writing? After many English conferences, many English classes, and many professional journals later I learned about the teaching of composition and the misuse of literature.

Erica Linderman, who states that first year writing instructors should teach writing, presents a solid argument against placing literature in the composition class, but others (Gary Tate, Michael Gold, Robin Lent, Dan Morgan, Sylvia Holladay) counter with their reasons for including such reading in composition. In fact, most professors I know take this stance so long as the main course objectives involve writing.

The kind of reading selected for the composition class varies from campus to campus. Some in our profession prefer that the readings be professional essays; others prefer popular magazines and other material of interest to the student (Gold 261). If a novel is selected, some prefer a recognized name that belongs somewhere in the "canon." At first we used Brontë, Chopin, Hawthorne, Hardy, Hemingway, and Faulkner. At East Georgia College we have tried all of these renowned authors and more and their best known novels, but now we have moved over a period of trial and error to contemporary novels, even best sellers; we even have selected a new biography or autobiography if currently popular.

During the last five years the novels we have used include <u>If Beale Street Could Talk</u> by James Baldwin; <u>The Heart of a Distant Forest</u> by Philip Lee Williams; <u>Whisper of the River</u>, <u>Run With the Horsemen</u>, and <u>When All the World Was Young</u> by Ferroll Sams; <u>Cold Sassy Tree</u> by Olive Ann Burns; <u>Song of Solomon</u> by Toni Morrison; and <u>The Firm</u> by John Grisham. Autobiographies have included these titles: <u>I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings</u> by Maga Angelou and <u>Growing Up</u> by Russell Baker.

Whenever we can, we arrange for the authors of the books selected to come to the campus. Over the past twenty years some authors who have spoken to the student body include Ferroll Sams, Olive Ann Burns, Judith Cofer, Pat Conroy, Louise Shivers, Rosemary Daniell, Louis Grizzard, Terry Kay, Philip Lee Williams, and Virginia Spencer Carr. If possible, we try to have them during the quarter we're reading their work if we are. Talking to the authors afterwards and having their own books autographed mean much to the students and faculty. The town's reading folk turn out as well.

The selection process begins when the English Department members sit down for the annual review of texts and procedures in the early spring. There are several subsequent meetings before final decisions are made since each person makes suggestions for books. These considerations are discussed at length:

1. Moderate length of book (not over 400 pages)
   (We want them to read a whole book--not scan. If they are to explore the pages, the length must not be excessive.)
2. Low cost of book
   (We decided long ago that it should be available in paperback if over $12.00. Our students are not generally financially well off. Since there are too many paperbacks available for four to eight dollars, we usually use paperbacks.)
3. No Cliff Notes or Monarch Notes available
   (The students cannot depend upon someone else's interpretation, good or bad. If these "helps" should be available, the book will not be considered.)

4. Consideration of student interests/needs

(Our students seem to enjoy books about the South, about Georgia in particular - especially those written by Georgia authors, about current issues, about growing up, and about local color.)

5. The difficulty of text

(We check the difficulty of the text. We don't want to discourage reading by selecting a text that is too difficult to comprehend and thus turn them off at this point. Students can read those more complex novels later!)

In the exploration the faculty try to find books that are interesting, exciting, stimulating, informative, and relative. We never want to forget the chief focus of the course--writing, so we must not forget that we'll be teaching the writing process, grammar drill, sentence combining exercises, and any other of a myriad of components needed for composition training as well as using the novel for a stimulation for writing.

The selection process ends only when students respond in writing. During fall quarter a student wrote on an evaluation: "The novel Song of Solomon blew my mind until I realized what it was all about." Her essay had been positively great! Students read, discuss, and then write. Simple? Actually, yes. The novel adds excitement and is a capstone to the first composition course.

To delineate briefly what happens in the classes each quarter is to begin with the reading assignment. If the book appears somewhat difficult to the student, the instructor may give some preliminary assistance. Quite frequently, the instructors meet to discuss the books before they begin to teach them--a fun time for the faculty. Last fall we gathered to talk one afternoon for two hours about Song of Solomon.

On the day the discussion begins, the instructor gives a brief quiz on the book's content. Why? We don't want any student left out of the discussion and he or she may wait to read or even not read. In the case of Song of Solomon the interesting names might be the focal point of this quiz since figuring out who's who makes some students feel triumphant. Macon Dead I, II, and III (Milkman) intrigue the reader, and tracing the family lineage back to Solomon, "who flew back" to Africa, makes Milkman feel fulfilled. When Cold Sassy Tree is being tested, the plot, the themes, and the characters like Will's Aunt Loma and his girlfriend Lightfoot may be explored by enthusiastic students. Letting the students express themselves before the teacher begins sets the tone for freedom of expression and reading their responses on these quizes usually excites the instructors. The instructors enjoy themselves as well.

The discussion days are the best part though they are few. Once more, literary criticism is not the point. Toni Morrison's life and successes might be highlighted before the plot is revealed and the main ideas are discussed. Character development is often explored. With Song of Solomon students have fun with the "maturation theme," the "flight" theme, the Biblical names and their possible plot connections, and Milkman's character. That great love story in Cold Sassy Tree or Will Tweedy's antics are always highlights in that discussion. Dr. Ferrell Sams, author of the trilogy that closely parallels his own life, provides the students with the raw material for discussion of growing pains in Whisper of the River, a novel rich in detail about thinly disguised Macon, Georgia, and Mercer University. Philip Lee Williams provokes sensitiveness about growing old in The Heart of A Distant Forest, set also in Georgia at fictitious Shadow Pond.

Finally, the students receive a writing assignment which has at least four choices. They are asked to write the essay using quotes and points from the text for support. Of course, this technique assists later in writing research

papers and provides a bridge to our second English composition course, Writing about Literature. Most importantly, it allows for the student to support his views. Two typical topics on Williams' novel are:

1. In The Heart of A Distant Forest Andrew Lachlan wants "order." Relate this desire to three or four different aspects of his life. Suggestions: his historical research, his work in and around his home, his relationship with Callie, his relationship with Willie, his reactions to impending death.
2. In order to fill the void left when his son died, Andrew maintains important relationships with younger males--Louis Percy, Bill McAdam, and Willie. Discuss what each of these relationships means to Andrew and how they differ from one another.

These essays should be the richest, fullest, cleanest! (Richer in detail, longer in length than usual, cleaner in mechanics and grammar.) The very best seems to come forth, partially I think, because they are free to think for themselves. This is "Democracy through Language," NCTE's Program Theme for 1993.

For our students this avenue of exploration seems right. There is no enigma. Curriculum decisions must reflect the individual departmental culture. The books we use may appear non-traditional or even anti-intellectual, but their use is rather traditional. The benefits of using novels in composition courses include creating awareness and respect for cultural diversity; a sensitivity for racial bias as well as sexual and religious discrimination; understanding of family relationships, the effect of poverty, community ritual, power/political pressures; an expansion of experience. Reading novels, biographies, and autobiographies stimulates thinking for one's self and expressing those thoughts in both oral and written media. The apparent outcomes include an enhanced self esteem and an

increased interest in books. These beliefs have been reinforced by my twenty-five years of novel instruction in the composition class.

Though East Georgia College is only twenty years old, it has opened up educational opportunity to an area that is both economically and culturally deprived. Since most students are first generation college students, we find them not so academically prepared as intellectually curious, maybe even starving. We capitalize on this readiness to accept suggestions for reading. Where does it lead? If our evaluation measures mean anything, students are continuing to read after they leave our classrooms and our college. How do I know? They write to tell me.

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